

Celebrating the Continuance of the Indigenous Caribbean Cultures: Review of an Exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian

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On March 22 and 23, 2003, more than 900 people attended an historic two-day event held at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in New York City. Taíno and Carib community members from across the Caribbean were invited to participate in the museum's Expressive Culture Series program. Participants included: Dr. Jose Barreiro (Taíno) representing Cuba, Prosper Paris (Carib) representing the island of Waitikubuli (Dominica), Nina M. R. Aponte (Taíno) representing Boriken (Puerto Rico), Ricardo Bharath (Carib) representing Cairi (Trinidad), and Cándida Peralta (Taíno) representing Quisqueya (Dominican Republic). [1]



The program was inspired by an exhibit titled [“The New Old World, Living beyond the Myth”](#) by photographer Marisol Villanueva, seen in the photo at left standing next to Dr. José Barreiro, a member of Nación Taína (Taíno Nation) and a professor at Cornell University, during a lecture at the NMAI. This photo exhibit focused on surviving Taíno and Carib communities in the Caribbean. The invited participants for the Expressive Culture Series program were all featured in the photo exhibit themselves. Many of our programs are done in conjunction with existing exhibits and we invite people who are showcased or have objects pertaining to their specific cultures to participate in our programs. [2]

I first heard of Marisol while I on a field trip to The Tohono Odham Indian reservation in Arizona. I received a phone call from Marisol requesting information on Taínos in the

Dominican Republic and the possibility of having a photographic exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian. Marisol at the time was involved in a project documenting various Indigenous communities in North, Central and South America. It was at this point she became interested in the Caribbean. Since our initial conversation it took nearly three years between negotiations and postponements due to the tragedy of 9/11 to get the exhibit and program going. [3]

This exhibition was unique in that, for the first time Taíno and Carib people were showcased together. Although there is a fair amount of documentation on the continuation of Carib culture, there is very little on the Taíno. For our museum visitors who were under the notion that the Taíno were extinct, as has been written in countless books, it was a welcome change to be able to visually witness that Taíno extinction was a myth. To see pictures of Carib and Taíno people making casabe bread made many realize that the real story of the indigenous people of the Caribbean is only now being told. The exhibit accomplished its goal, which was to provoke people interested in the region to take a closer look at the history, culture and customs of the contemporary Caribbean. [4]

The program commenced with a curatorial lecture by the photographer Marisol Villanueva and by Dr. José Barreiro, who represented the community of Caridad de los Indios in Cuba (community chief, Don Panchito Ramirez, was unable to attend due to an illness). Later that afternoon, community representatives sat at five different tables set up in the museum's rotunda area. Each table exhibited objects from the communities being represented. [5]

Museum visitors and staff were able to have informal dialogue and interaction with our guests. Our staff learned many new things about contemporary Carib and Taino life ways. For some visitors it was the first time they had ever heard of Taino or Carib survival in the Caribbean. For many others it was a get-together with their island relatives. There are many people of both Taino and Carib descent in the New York area. Community members of the Taino Nation were present as were representatives of the Garifuna people, also known as the Black Carib. There were also Taino family group members such as Maisti Yucayeque Taino, Taino del Norte, T.A.L.K, Tanama and Guajataca, etc. [6]



Dr. José Barreiro's table had literature available about the Cuban Indian experience. Working along with José were his *jimaguas* (twin boys, seen in the photo above), who enjoyed themselves immensely selling books authored by their father. [7]



At the next table sat Nina M. R. Aponte (in the photo above), who despite feeling ill, shared with the public her beautiful necklaces, made from indigenous seeds found in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Nina was delightful and very helpful with other participants who did not speak English. Nina is bilingual and has done workshops in Puerto Rico on cassabe bread making and Taíno identity. [8]

Prosper Paris's table (shown in the photo below, where Prosper is joined by NMAI staff member Juanita Velasco, an Ixil Maya), had all kinds of Carib Indian woven baskets, woven fans, toy canoes, and Carib music CDs from the Island of Dominica. Prosper was very friendly with museum guests, and the museum staff were very impressed with him. Prosper is very active in his community, where he works as an eco-tourism guide. [9]



Ricardo Bharath, Chief of the Santa Rosa Carib community in Trinidad, had the most intricate, woven baskets on display. Ricardo also brought cassabe bread from his community to share with the public. Ricardo Bharath is on the right in the photo below, speaking with David Kahian Campos (Taíno-Boriken), who had visited the Carib Community in Arima, Trinidad in 1998. [10]



Candida Castillo de Peralta, who hails from the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic, brought cassabe, cassabe making utensils, as well as other kinds of products made from yucca (manioc). Ricardo Bharath was very impressed with her *casabe* as was she, of his and Prosper Paris's baskets. Candida also received seed necklaces from Nina Aponte. The spirit of sharing and giving was particularly contagious this day. It was indeed a very good thing to see. Afterward, Marisol Villanueva, who worked meticulously on her "New Old World" exhibit, gave a tour that concluded the event. Candida Peralta, in the blue suit, is shown at the centre of the photo below with Wakonax of the Taíno Nation to the left Guaraguaorix of the Maisiti Yucayeque Taíno to the right. [11]



For my part, as a Taíno from Quisqueya, I was extremely pleased. This was the culmination of three years of work. Although I have been doing Public Programs at the Smithsonian for eight years now, I had no idea how hard it was to get an exhibit off the ground and could not have accomplished this without the support of my supervisor Shawn Termin (Lakota) and Education Manager Johanna Gorelick, who were both phenomenal. To have Taíno and Carib people together in one space, sharing stories and comparing the cultures of our peoples and homelands, was a dream come true for me, as I am sure it was for others as well. I hope it was just the beginning of ongoing Caribbean Amerindian cooperation. [12]

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First draft submitted: 06 May 2003

Revised version: 25 May 2003

Second revised version: 28 August 2003

Published: 29 August 2003

Citation

Please cite this article as follows, including paragraph numbers if necessary:

Estevez, Jorge (2003). Celebrating the Continuance of the Indigenous Caribbean Cultures: Review of an Exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian. [12]

paragraphs] *KACIKE: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology* [On-line Journal]. Available at: <http://www.kacike.org/NMAIReview.html> [Date of access: Day, Month, Year].

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